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ABSTRACT

This Digest describes factors that may restrict access to adult literacy education in North America and discusses several potential solutions to these problems from programs that have aimed to provide adult literacy instruction to specific minority groups. Although the barriers and potential solutions apply to all minority groups, two populations often considered "at risk"--immigrant women and involuntary minorities--are given particular attention. (Contains 18 references.) (ERIC Adjunct Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (VWL)

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National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education
Access to Literacy Education for Language
Minority Adults

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Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

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Access to Literacy Education for Language Minority Adults

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A significant problem for adult literacy education is that of language minorities not participating or sustaining their involvement in instructional programs. Many literacy programs designed for or by majority populations may be perceived as inaccessible, irrelevant, or inappropriate by minority populations, even those groups most in need of literacy education.

This digest describes factors that may restrict access to adult literacy education in North America and discusses several potential solutions to these problems from programs that have aimed to provide adult literacy instruction to specific minority groups. Although the barriers and potential solutions apply to all minority groups, two populations often considered "at risk"—immigrant women and involuntary minorities—are given particular attention.

Barriers to Program Participation

Four kinds of obstacles tend to hinder adults' participation in formal education (Spanard, 1990): *institutional barriers*, including location, schedules, fees, site atmosphere; *situational barriers*, including job commitments, home and family responsibilities, lack of money, lack of child care, and transportation problems; *psychosocial barriers*, such as attitudes, beliefs, values, past experiences as a student, self-esteem, and opinions of others; and *pedagogical barriers*, such as a program's lack of responsiveness to the interests, backgrounds, and existing skills of those groups they seek to serve.

For minority cultural groups such as recent immigrants, some or all of these obstacles may combine with additional factors like limited proficiency in the majority language; unfamiliarity with or exclusion from local cultural practices and institutions; and insecure economic, housing, family, or employment situations to hinder participation in educational programs as well as integration into the society at large (Bell, 1990; Weinstein, 1984).

For example, Klassen's (1991) study of Hispanic immigrants in Toronto shows that adult Hispanics with little prior schooling who attempt to learn basic literacy and a second language within the unfamiliar domain of formal classrooms often experience too many concurrent demands resulting in withdrawal from conventional educational settings.

Immigrant Women

Many immigrant women experience barriers preventing their access to literacy education (Cumming & Gill, 1992; Rockhill, 1987). Common institutional barriers are lack of on-site child care by trusted members of their own culture, location of classes in unfamiliar institutions outside of local neighborhoods, and course schedules that conflict with family responsibilities. Situational barriers may include lack of safe or convenient transportation to and from classes, commitments to part-time work, unfamiliarity with institutional practices and government services, and respon-

sibilities to children or extended family members. Psychosocial barriers may appear in traditional attitudes of family members or community leaders, which may restrict women from educating themselves beyond initial schooling or from seeking employment that conflicts with family responsibilities or conventional roles. Pedagogical barriers may include instructional materials and lessons that do not have immediate relevance to women's personal situations, appear too "bookish" or impractical to be of immediate benefit, or threaten cultural values or roles.

This problem has large dimensions. In Canada, for instance, census figures for the past two decades have shown the population of women who speak no English at all to be double that of men, even though almost equal proportions of men and women who do not speak English enter the country each year as immigrants (Boyd, 1990). Evidently, immigrant men acquire the majority language through work, education, or social contacts, whereas immigrant women may be bound to family responsibilities, jobs, or traditional roles, which prevent them from more extensive socialization and cultural adaptation.

Involuntary Minorities

As Ogbu (1987) observes, education is often not successful for minorities who find themselves in a caste-like position because they have come to a new nation involuntarily (as in the historical case of slaves or the contemporary one of political refugees) or have been conquered and subjugated during settlement (as in the case of indigenous aboriginals). Such involuntary minorities may develop "a sense of social identity in opposition to . . . a dominant group" (p. 323), resisting behaviors (such as high levels of literacy or participation in advanced education) associated with assimilation into the majority society.

An example in adult literacy education appears in Giltrow and Colhoun's (1989) study of Mayan refugees residing in western Canada. Having endured centuries of severe persecution in Central America and not assimilated into the majority Hispanic society there, certain Mayan adults who have gained political refugee status in Canada resist using or learning literacy in English because written documentation has customarily rendered them vulnerable to persecution, alien cultural values, and only partially comprehensible legal or financial obligations. Instead, they hire translators and scribes to perform necessary legal or bureaucratic functions requiring literacy. Moreover, this population has generally avoided participating in conventional forms of adult education, finding such instruction to be irrelevant, in violation of their cultural norms for group behavior, or contrary to their social interests.

Related examples appear in efforts to provide literacy instruction to aboriginal peoples with histories of subjugation within their communities. For example, Millard (1990) found that her efforts to provide adult literacy instruction in a rural Athapaskan community

in the Yukon were visibly resisted through violent behavior, verbal abuse, non-attendance, and unwillingness to perform classroom tasks—behaviors consistent with the history of the local community, which was marked by a longstanding need to resist cultural and ideological assimilation into the European-background majority population.

Potential Solutions: Culturally Relevant Programs

Innovative educational settings can empower such groups by helping them foster self-awareness and active responsibility for their social positions, as well as the means to change those positions (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

The most promising potential solutions to these problems appear in programs for specific language and cultural groups within local communities, an approach cited by Barton and Hamilton (1990, p. 22) as the "ideal" policy provision and an international trend. As Moll (1989) argues, mainstream education tends to favor the culture and practices of majority populations; therefore, the challenge for literacy educators of minority populations is to create unique, participatory educational programs that address and capitalize on the cultural values, interests, and aspirations of local minority communities.

Examples of such programs have been documented for Hispanics in California (Delgado-Gaitan, 1987; Wallerstein, 1983), Cambodian Hmong in Philadelphia (Weinstein, 1984), Haitian Creole speakers in Boston (Auerbach, 1990), and Punjabi Sikh women in Vancouver (Cumming & Gill, in press). Among the elements common to these programs are:

- Recruitment of learners using communication networks such as word-of-mouth referrals or TV or radio interviews on local multicultural programs in languages of potential participants, and affiliation with community service groups;
- Location of classes within ethnic neighborhoods and at local centers with reputations for community service;
- Instructors who are themselves members of the minority population, are able to speak the minority language with students when necessary or appropriate, and present successful role models;
- Scheduling of classes at times that are convenient to participants;
- Support structures such as on-site child care, transportation subsidies, and counselling in participants' mother tongues;
- Curriculum content and instructional materials based on participants' own immediate experiences, personal knowledge, perceived problems, and social interests and aspirations;
- Participatory approaches to program planning, development, and evaluation that include learners themselves;
- Ongoing liaisons with community workers, such as counselors, teachers, and health care workers;
- Bridging to other programs such as job training or non-sheltered literacy, vocational, or academic courses;
- "Recycling" of successful learners back into programs as mentors, teachers, or aides.

As Jurmo (1989) points out, such programs may reach their maximum potential by adopting a participatory philosophy, in the fullest sense of the word. Active participation by adult learners in program decision-making at all levels has the multiple benefits of improving educational efficiency while enhancing participants' personal development and equipping them with the means to transform their local contexts productively. Principles of learner participation may be most valuable for language minority populations who have traditionally been excluded from roles of power, prestige, or authority. They stand to benefit most from assuming greater control and responsibility over their own learning; over the structures, content, and processes of their continuing education;

and over the futures of their own social communities. Literacy programs that fail to act on the potential for language minority learners to shape and direct the nature of their programs, in their own terms, may be creating distinct barriers that exclude such learners from any meaningful level of participation.

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